

Review

The Gates of Eden

Christopher Lasch†

The Greening of America. By Charles A. Reich. New York, Random House, 1970. Pp. 399. \$7.95.

That a would-be disturber of the political peace should reach hundreds of thousands of readers ought to be a matter for rejoicing. Unfortunately Reich's criticism of American life, for all his obviously good-hearted intentions, does not cut very deep. It can be accepted without any profound unsettling of existing habits of thought. In many ways the book reinforces those habits and thereby deepens our confusion instead of helping to dispel it.

Reich has said that he wished to explain the young to their troubled parents, and it is clear that it is parents, not the young, who are buying and reading *The Greening of America* and finding in it not so much a clear explanation of the youth revolt—which in its rejection of traditional individualism Reich does not even understand—as a reassurance that things are working themselves out in the best possible way. It seems that the “kids,” for all their bluntness and unpredictability, have caught a vision of a brighter future. After all they are only trying to put into practice their parents' ideals. They “accept” those ideals; what they object to is merely “their parents' failure to live these same ideals.”¹ By taking seriously the old American dream, the younger generation has initiated a bloodless revolution. “It will not be like revolutions of the past”—those decadent old-world revolutions in which men fought passionately over politics, used swords and guns against each other, and shook the social order to its foundations, incidentally causing bitterness and suffering. Our revolution “will not require violence to succeed, and it cannot be successfully resisted by violence.” Already it is “spreading with amazing rapidity, and already our laws, institutions and social

† Professor of History, University of Rochester

1. C. REICH, *THE GREENING OF AMERICA* 221 (1970) [hereinafter cited to page number only].

structure are changing in consequence."² The change goes deeper than merely political change. Compared with the youth upheaval, "a mere revolution, such as the French or the Russian, seems inconsequential—a shift in the base of power." Those who look to politics for change, Reich believes, do not understand "the crucial importance of *choosing a new life-style*."³

There is something incorrigibly American about the illusion that great changes can take place without a great price having to be paid for them. In belittling the revolutions of the past, Reich tries to wave away the pain and suffering that necessarily accompany a genuine social transformation. Because he chooses to remain ignorant of history—substituting for historical analysis a diagrammatic sketch of the development of three stages of "consciousness"—he blinds himself to a fact that no one interested in changing American society can afford to ignore: precisely because change is painful, people have to be desperate in order to risk it. Bad as things are, the prospect of chaos is usually worse. That is one reason advocates of change have to offer programs of their own, and not merely programs but a coherent social vision, a new culture. Even then, masses of people will not risk the uncertainties of revolutionary change unless they have come to the point of having nothing left to lose.

For Reich, however, it is enough for people simply to choose new "life-styles." Reich sees revolution as something that begins with individuals; this too is very American. The sense of history as a collective undertaking is entirely foreign to American individualism. For this reason Americans are uneasy with politics, a collective expression. "Politics" signifies corruption, compromise, deals; true statemanship is "above" politics, or entirely outside it. Reich shares this ingrained American suspicion of politics. He dismisses the belief that change comes through changing institutions as an attribute of an outmoded "consciousness"—"Consciousness II" (as distinguished from "Consciousness I"—*laissez-faire* liberalism—and "Consciousness III"—the youth revolt). Both socialists and liberals suffer from the disease of Consciousness II. They still believe in politics.

Consciousness III, on the other hand, knows that politics is a snare and a delusion. It understands that "the controlling factor" in history "is consciousness."⁴ It knows that "we can make a new choice whenever we are ready to do so. We can end or modify the age of science and we

2. P. 4.

3. P. 350 (emphasis in the original).

4. P. 338.

can abandon the Protestant ethic."⁶ We can begin the revolution right now by growing our hair. "Can anyone doubt that [long hair] will reach all the men in our society within a few years?"⁶ It is in comparison with such momentous transformations that "mere revolution" seems "inconsequential."

Reich belongs to a long evangelistic tradition in the United States, a tradition that regards social life—insofar as it regards social life at all—as the product of innumerable "choices" made by individuals. Brother, repent! "[T]he central fact about Consciousness III [is] its assertion of the power to *choose* a way of life."⁷ Marx, we are told, made the mistake of thinking that "consciousness is determined by material interests."⁸ What Marx actually said was that "social existence" determines consciousness—that "legal relations," for example, "could neither be understood by themselves, nor explained by the so-called general progress of the human mind," but "are rooted in the material conditions of life."⁹ Thought does not exist in a vacuum. Men make their own history, since society itself, while rooted in biological necessity, is largely the creation of human culture; but men make history within limits set by the history they have already made. Marx knew that without a demonstration that the material basis of socialism had been created by the conditions of bourgeois society itself, his criticism of capitalism would remain disembodied and would carry no more weight than any other kind of moral exhortation.

Not so with Reich. He interprets the revolt of the affluent young, and the fact that it is opposed by the working class, to mean that consciousness is a matter of personal assertion, particularly in a stage of social development at which "the economic ceases to be of primary concern in men's lives."¹⁰ Only in America could this kind of statement pass for social criticism. Never mind the distortion of Marx. One does not have to be a Marxist to see that the collective provision for man's material needs—food, shelter, reproduction of the species—is the basis of social life, or that a rising standard of living (greatly exaggerated by Reich in any case) does not suddenly make those questions irrelevant or even of less than "primary concern." Of course men also need culture—a rich structure of meanings that makes sense of experience. But culture can-

5. P. 305.

6. Pp. 330-31.

7. P. 354 (emphasis in the original).

8. P. 308.

9. K. MARX, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in KARL MARX & FREDERICK ENGELS: *SELECTED WORKS* 181 (1968).

10. Pp. 308-09.

not be regarded as a matter of individual "life-styles." It is a collective creation, itself deeply influenced by the ways in which society organizes the production of material needs. A society that leaves production to "private enterprise" will get a culture to match, one characteristic of which is precisely the tendency to see culture as the product of private choice. In this respect Reich is truly a man of his times.

Advocates of change, one would suppose, would find it necessary to understand the distribution of power in the United States. Has the basis of power changed? Has the possession of property lost its political importance? Has a managerial class replaced the capitalists? These are questions of great complexity and importance, with which serious students of American society have been engaged for some time. Instead of wrestling with them, Reich accepts the clichés of pop sociology and draws from them the comforting picture of a society that can be altered through acts of individual will. Since "there is no class struggle; today there is only one class" and since "there is no longer any ruling class except the machine itself," we are all free, even millionaires (especially millionaires?), to choose "liberation instead of the plastic world of material wealth" and to exchange "wealth, status and power for love, creativity, and liberation."¹¹

Reich's diagnosis of what is wrong with American society, like his conception of the way in which everything that is wrong will be righted, consistently overestimates the importance of "individual freedom." Reich is quite correct in asserting that what is wrong cannot be understood merely as economic deprivation. "The real question for the worker just as for the black man, is 'who am I? what sort of culture should I have . . .?'"¹² This statement contains an important insight, but it should not obscure the fact that economic deprivation still exists; nor should it be taken to mean that cultural questions are not class questions at the same time. The issue for workers, and for Americans in general, is: what kind of culture should *we* have? Even here, Reich's formulation of the issue still suffers from the assumption that culture is a matter of private choice. His principal indictment of American society is not that it tolerates alarming levels of poverty or destroys the environment or makes interminable war against other peoples, still less that it fails to project a coherent world-view, but that it interferes with personal freedom. The "system," with its "false consciousness" (another empty phrase, much employed by Reich), denies extended vacations to the

11. P. 310.

12. Pp. 287-88.

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office worker, free speech to the G.I., long hair to the high school student.¹³ It inhibits the “search for self.”¹⁴ Advertising creates a demand for leisure, for tropical vacations, and “sensuality,” which it cannot satisfy—and this disparity between expectations and reality in turn engenders revolt. Without pausing to consider what social groups have an interest in preserving the present arrangements—he prefers to talk vaguely of “forces”—Reich expounds at great length on the decline of personal “satisfactions:” “adventure,” “travel,” “sex,” “nature,” “growth, learning, change,” “responding to own needs” (“staying in bed when the need is felt, drinking a milk shake on a hot afternoon, or stopping everything to watch a rainstorm”), “wholeness,” “sensuality,” “new feelings,” “expanded consciousness,” “affection,” “community,” “brotherhood,” “liberation.”¹⁵

Three points need to be made about this catalogue. In the first place, an efficiently organized industrial system can tolerate a wide range of private satisfactions, providing they remain private. Hence a demand for more “satisfactions” is hardly a revolutionary program. In the second place, the demand itself reflects a pinched and meager conception of the good life, one that owes much to advertising and travel brochures—embodiments of the very culture Reich professes to deplore. Finally, as we have already had occasion to note, Reich has no conception of social life or culture that goes beyond the individual. He observes that the industrial system—since it often gives the impression of running out of human control—denies us the satisfaction of “creating an environment,” but he defines this purely in personal terms: “Taking whatever elements are given, natural, human, and social, and making a unique pattern out of them as one’s own creation.”¹⁶ Once again we see how the progressive educator’s ideal of individual “creativity” blunts the edge of any radical critique of American culture, which would have to begin with a recognition that “creating an environment” is a collective undertaking, and that it is precisely the collective decision to create a more humane environment—as opposed to personal hedonism—that the industrial system as presently constituted cannot tolerate.

One more example will suffice to show how Reich personalizes and therefore trivializes every issue that he takes up. At one point he deplores the university’s obsession with scholarly “productivity.” A more

13. P. 282.

14. P. 283 and *passim*.

15. Pp. 152-55.

16. P. 154.

serious critic would proceed to an analysis of the body of scholarship produced by current conditions. He might try to show that the flood of scholarly monographs in no way enriches our understanding and in fact impedes the necessary work of theory and synthesis. He might also try to show that much of this work is ideological in content, serving to legitimate existing social relations. Instead, Reich objects that writing scholarly books is rarely a "creative" experience for the individuals engaged in it.¹⁷ This completely misses the point: it is precisely because the activity does offer genuine pleasure that there is so little disposition to criticize the institution that makes it possible, the modern university. As long as the university allows us to "do our own work," we ask no questions of it. The real problem of academic life is not how to find private satisfactions but how to create a *community* of scholars. More teaching and less research—Reich's solution—is a trite and hollow formulation that obscures the underlying question of *what* we are to teach.

The prevailing social and cultural conditions in the United States are far too grim to allow us to be diverted by instant radicals, with-it professors, and Pollyannas of whatever ideological persuasion. A threadbare garment of individualism, optimism, and evangelical enthusiasm cannot take on new splendor by being decked out with love beads.

17. See pp. 176-77.